

THE SEAFARING MAN—By Stewart Edward White

I HAD always from my early youth intended to be a newspaper man. To this end I fitted myself in every way imaginable and at the proper time obtained a billet on the New York Star. To my surprise I discovered the latter item to be the most difficult of accomplishment, but by means of my acquaintance with Senator Mengel I succeeded in obtaining a chance—on space.

So great was my enthusiasm for my new duties that I did not even take time to look about me in the city, but reported at noon on the day of my arrival. This seemed to me at the time and has seemed ever since most commendable in me, for all my life heretofore I had resided in a small prairie town of the middle West.

I sent my letter through an office boy to Mr. Stevens, the city editor and friend of Senator Mengel, with whom my correspondence had been. To my surprise I was shown into the presence of a man of very young appearance. He looked me over in a manner not at all flattering, asked me half a dozen aimless questions, informed me that he would soon give me an assignment and dismissed me in charge of the office boy.

The latter led me into a large room full of desks, shaded lights and young men. A few of the latter were pounding on some of the numerous typewriters, but most lounged, smoked and conversed in low voices or read copies of the Star. I seated myself modestly at one side. None paid me the slightest attention.

Thus I spent the day. From time to time a speaking tube shrieked out a man's name. At this one of the reporters would disappear. In time I was left quite alone and it had grown dark. I had not eaten since noon, but I did not dare leave.

Toward 8 o'clock young Mr. Stevens rushed into the room and looked about rather wildly. He used some queer expressions.

"Not one of these spangle leg key pounders back yet?" he snorted.

"What is this? a rest cure, what?"

"As I was the only inmate of the room I answered, although the city editor's remark was not thrown in my direction. I told him that to the best of my belief this was not a rest cure but the reporters' room of the Star. At this he whirled on me suddenly.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

I recalled my identity to his memory.

"Oh, yes, the cub," he commented disparagingly. He looked around again as though hoping to evolve somebody else from the shadows.

"Well, come here," he growled at last. "You'll have to do." He sat on one corner of a table.

"Look here," he began, "do you know anything about ships?"

As a matter of fact I had never seen one, but I had read a great many able works by Cooper, Clark Russell and others and I have always maintained that a clever and resourceful man need never really confess ignorance of anything. So I told him quite confidently that I did.

"That's odd," he cried, apparently somewhat relieved. "Two years ago a ship called the Nancy Lee disappeared somewhere in the South Seas. A boatload of the crew came ashore at Honolulu, but scattered immediately. There were rumors of mutiny, trouble, what not—

"Now I've just got a private tip that the mate of the Nancy Lee has showed up in town. Nobody knows it now, but to-morrow every newspaper man in town will be on. I want his story. It may be a big one, for just now the firm that owned the Nancy Lee is of international importance.

"You must go down and get it. He may be a shy bird—I wish I had a more experienced man to send. Be back by 12 at latest. Here's the address of the saloon where you'll find him."

He shook his head sorrowfully. I took the card with the address and went out, highly elated at the opportunity so unexpectedly mine.

By constant inquiry I at length found my way to the saloon. This proved to be on the waterfront, not so far from the Star office, but reached only through a bewildering maze of streets. The place itself was mean and dingy.

I entered directly into a smallish room whose floor was covered with damp sawdust. A bar down one side and three tables and a stove filled nearly the whole space.

I recognized my man at once. Indeed, save for a farmer looking individual in cap and blue denim overalls, he was the only customer of the place. A hasty reference to my memoranda reminded me that his name was Scroggs.

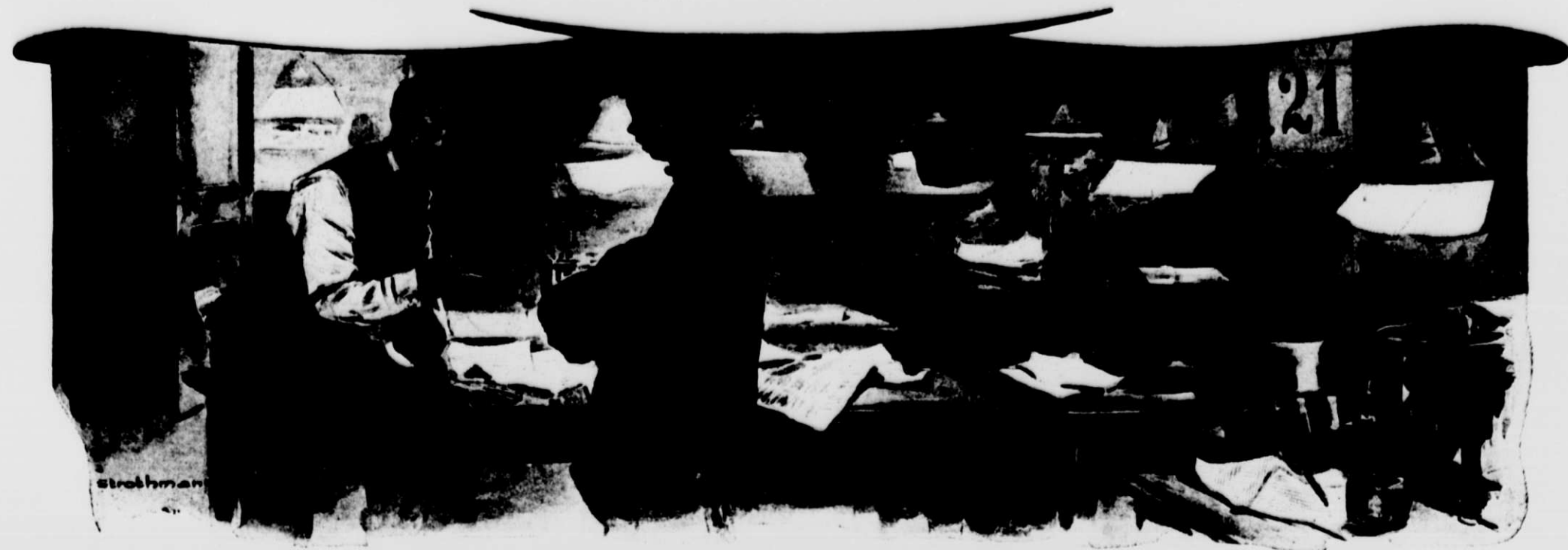
At the moment he leaned against the bar under a lamp, where I had a full view of him. He was short, very round, had a red jolly face and fat legs. I recognized him the more easily in that he wore the full sailor regalia—round cap with ribbons, open blouse with white braid, trousers at once tight across the hips and loose about the ankles, and low patent leather pumps. I was pleased to find that the stage sailors I had seen in our own little theatre were so true to type.

For a moment I stood deciding on the most effective approach. His face did not suggest great reticence, nor power of will. I made up my mind to try surprise, and immediately set myself to acting on this decision.

"Good evening, Mr. Scroggs," said I, approaching him. "I suppose you were sorry to lose the Nancy Lee?"

The barkeeper stopped wiping a glass, the farmer chap turned to me; Scroggs stared without a word. The silence became oppressive.

"What?" asked the sailor huskily at last.



"Oh, yes, the cub," growled the city editor. "Well, come here; you'll have to do. Do you know anything about ships?"

As a matter of fact I had never seen one, so I told him quite confidently that I did.

I saw his astonishment, and meant to carry it off with a high hand before he could recover.

"You see I know you," said I, "and all about you. What I want is your story of how the Nancy Lee was lost below Honolulu two years ago."

A look of admiration crept into his fishy blue eyes.

"Well, shiver my spanker!" said he, "how did you guess it?"

"Never mind that. What I want is the story."

"Well, but my dead eyes!" he rejoined, "but who are you?"

"I'm a reporter from the Star," said I, feeling a little important over the announcement.

"I strike my colors," he cried. "Come to the table and sit down, and I'll spin the yarn."

Elated at my perspicacity and my easy victory, I followed him to the table indicated. I was delighted with the nautical roll of his talk, and was overjoyed to observe him, just before seating himself, hitch his trousers up fore and aft, as in the first steps of the hornpipe.

"And now, my hearty—" he began, and came to a dead stop. I followed the direction of his eyes. They were riveted mesmerically on the barkeeper.

"Won't you drink something?" I asked.

He brightened at once.

"Grog!" he growled in a hoarse voice.

This must have been a mere figure of speech, for the barkeeper brought him straight whiskey. He drank it off at a gulp, looked sadly into the empty glass, and turned to me.

"And now, my hearty," said he, "what is it you want to know?"

"I want to know about the loss of the Nancy Lee in the South Seas two years ago—and about the mutiny," said I boldly.

"It's a long yarn," he sighed, dropping back into his chair, "and I'm a poor talker—leastways except in a friendly way and among friends like you."

"With a pipe, and maybe a social glass—"

He paused. I motioned to the barkeeper. Thus encouraged, he commenced his tale.

"I wasn't always as you see me now," he began with a shake of the head, "no indeed—"

I hastily produced my notebook and began to inscribe in shorthand. This art I had acquired as part of my preliminary training. I have since been informed that reporters do not customarily take down verbatim interviews.

My belief in its advisability, however, especially when, as in the present instance, dealing with unfamiliar technical terms, remains unbroken.

The seafaring man broke off with a deep sigh and continued to shake his head.

"You have seen better days?" I encouraged him.

"I have, indeed," said he.

"Your state in life has been loftier?"

"Tain't that," he explained. "It's my finger. Once I was as slender and graceful as the leopards' fawn. Now look at me. It was weakness for food that brought me to this pass, and near to my destruction. Keel haul my tail, but I was close to death!"

He sipped at his whiskey.

"I was borned on one of them little islands in the South Seas jam full of Kanakas, and date palms, and breadfruits, and atolls, and parakeets, and copras swingin' from tree to tree."

"I thought copra was a sort of dried coconut," I ventured to interpose.

He shifted his fishy blue eye to mine.

"That's just slang," said he; "these yere copras I'm tellin' you of lives on nothin' but dried coconut; which same they split and pile up on the bases of cliffs with a southern exposure. That's where the folks first learned about dried coconut being good for anything, so naturally they named it after the intelligent little animals that first showed them."

He wiped his brow and sipped another mouthful of whiskey. "But horn-buckle my bow-wow, young feller, do you want this yarn or don't you?"

I hastened to assure him of my interest. After another sip he seemed to regain his equanimity, and in a moment he went on:

"The natives of that happy isle loved me from a little child. They took me with them on the huntin' and their fishin'. I played with their kiddies, and even Wallapo-Walooop, the high priest, let me look into his temple. I learned to speak the beautiful singin' syllables of the island languages, and was looked on by all and sundry as like a prince of royal blood. I was young and handsome then, and my finger was slim and beautichus as a girl's."

"But there came a time when I must leave. The world called me, and the vigorous blood of my ancestors called. There was great sorrow among them island people. They brought me presents, and they made me feasts where they served me yams and other furin delicacies and a rippin' good lot of drink."

He paused and his eyes, like the eyes of an automaton, turned to the

bar. I signalled the barkeeper. He resumed:

"At the speeches made on that joyous and sorrowful occasion, Wallapo-Walooop announced that by general vote I was to belong to the Wam-wams, which is a powerful priesthood. The initiation ceremonies I have sworn never to reveal; but when I come out, a full fledged priest, I had tattooed on my stomach the sacred fetich."

"Oh, son," says Wallapo-Walooop in the beautiful singin' syllables, 'that sign will rescue you from trouble wherever the island peoples live. If you find yourself in danger, all you have to do is to show the fetich, and to enct you will be exalted.'

"I tried to look to see what she was, but when I leaned over she got all wrinkled up, so I had to wait 'till I went home. Then I got me a mirror and took a squint. Say, blast my topknot! Keelson, but she was a beauty. They had tattooed a great big hairy, solemn face right on my stomach—red and blue in color, hairy as a general effect, and solemn as Sunday!"

"She gave me quite a shock, but she was a winner. I tried her the first chance I got on the natives of another island, and they just bumped their heads on the ground they was so tickled to see me. They wanted me to stay forever."

"But then feasts I tells you of is my final undoin', for the memory of them stayed with me forever after. No matter where I went or how sick I was, all I had to do was to think of them custard apples and frickersees and smokin' hot breadfruits to get an appetite on me like an anaconda."

"I'm hungry right now just from a-thinkin' of them. And as my memory has always been somethin' most remarkable, and me of a sort that loves to live in his past, the result is that I acquires the taste for food I tells you of a while back. Sometimes I get away with six or seven meals a day."

"This was all right, but it played Davy Jones with my beautichus fexer, I got fat, and the more I eat, why the fatter I got. Hard work didn't seem to make no manner of difference to me. I went up from 140 to 210, and was gettin' peaceful and contented. I was a good sailorman, douse my

bilge, but I was even if I shouldn't say it, and I never had no difficulty gettin' a berth. Fact is I used to ship on banana ships for choice. There was something about bananas that reminded me of my happy childhood. I used to eat about four bunches a week. Results was I put on flesh constant."

"That was all right, and nobody had any kick comin' as long as I did my work all regular and proper. But it played the devil with the fetich that had been tattooed on my stummick."

"You've see these Jap faces made out of rubber that you squeeze and they look funny? Or if you ain't seen them, perhaps you've seen these magic curved mirrors that shows you up like a blowing pollywatusus?"

"Well, that was Bill—I called the tattooed face Bill just to be comrade like. You never would have knowed him."

"He started out, bein' a lantern jawed solemn whiskery sort of Bill, with ferocity and dignity stickin' out all over him. But as my stummick got round from feedin', pore old Bill's disposition changed entire. He got fat too, with puffy cheeks and wide face and hair stickin' out all ways until he looked like a picture of the rising sun with a big wide grin on him. But the funny part was that he had such wide spaces between his features."

"They got plumb scattered. One eye was on his cheeks and the other nestlin' next his ear. His nose got shoved plumb in the middle of his smile. Pore old Bill, I was sorry for him, and I never went swimmin' with the crew any more for fear he'd get laughed at."

The sailor furtively wiped his eye, then gazed into his empty glass with an air of vast surprise.

"But the Nancy Lee?" I urged him.

"Pore old Bill," he murmured.

"You were going to tell me about the Nancy Lee?" I persisted.

He shook his head with an air of discouragement.

"It's too long a yarn," he proffered, "and I ain't no talker. It parches my throat to talk."

I held up a finger to the barkeeper, who without further instruction brought a whiskey for Scroggs and a small beer for myself.

"There I was at two hundred and thirty, and Bill all over the map," the

seafaring man went on suddenly, "when one evil day I shipped as captain of the Nancy Lee."

"I was told it was as first mate," I interrupted.

"Well, you see—that is—my rank was first mate, but really by private understandin' I was rated captain. The captain himself was an old man, friend of the owners; no good, man, catch on?"

"Our voyage out was all the heart could wish for. The trade wind blew fair, the dolphins and porpoises played merrily under our lee rail, and everything was lovely, in due time we raised the islands, and in an hour I was lookin' with emotion on the scenes of my innocent childhood."

"The particular island we anchored by was a new one on me. We was there to trade, and soon the dusky natives was swarmin' over our keelson. I treated them fair, as I always done, but bein' cautious by nature I only let a few of them on deck at a time."

"Among 'em was girls of surpassin' beauty, and I could see the signs of dissatisfaction among the crew because I wouldn't let 'em go ashore. One girl in especial was a rip-tearin' beauty; and the minute her eyes fell on me she was took like a fish. I couldn't help it; it just had to be."

"Wasn't that unfortunate? She couldn't conceal her feelin's, but followed me around with adornin' looks, like one of these brown eyed fex dogs. At first the results were merely geyn from the second mate and snarkers from the crew, but afore long green-eyed jealousy began to get in her work too."

"First off, there was a little bunch of the islanders—rejected suitors, I reckon—and then there was a Britisher named Simpkins, a kind of petty officer whose main job was to pipe the log and scrape the binnacle. But why inflit you with all the harrowin' details? The main result was that I come on deck the eighth day watch one night to discover that the crew had disobeyed my orders and gone ashore, and that the old captain and I was the only ones aboard the Nancy Lee. At the same instant of time the most blood curdin' shrieks arose from the beach and four or five big fires blazed up."

The door opened, a district messenger boy entered, looked about him and walked directly to us. He proffered me a message and his book. I signed, and tore open the envelope.

"How are you getting on? Can send another man now. Answer by messenger."

I tore a leaf from my notebook and rather proudly wrote the following reply:

Scroggs talking freely. Have about half of great story. Another man unnecessary.

This I gave to the boy, who promptly departed.

"Business from the office," I explained to Scroggs.

To my surprise I noted that the latter had improved the interruption to order another round of drinks.

"I got out my night glass," he continued his tale, "and took a look. The savages were dancin' round and round the fires wavin' clubs and assegais and such, while my pore unfortunate companions lay all around waitin' in their gore."

"I see there was no time to be lost. The old captain and I weighed the anchor as much as we could and guessed at the rest. But it was too late. Before we'd even got the top-sail studd'n' sl on her the savages had boarded us. We put up a desperate fight—I know I killed six myself—but was overpowered. The pore old captain was murdered as he lay, and I was about to share the same fate when the beautichus damsel I mentioned a while back throwed herself across my bosom and hollered out they must kill her first."

"With that they set to talkin', and after a little they decided to keep me for a while. So they bundled me ashore and put me in a cage and left me."

"That wasn't no ways pleasin', and I gave myself up for lost, but next mornin' they brought me the finest breakfast you ever see. It was eight courses long and had all sorts of coconut oil and palm oil fritters and things to make your mouth water. You bet I tucked into it till I couldn't hold no more. And along about mid-forenoon they brought me a light lunch and a heavy dinner at noon and a sort of 5 o'clock tea and a scrumptious supper."

"Say, I tell you, this isn't so worse, if I am in a cage."

"But when darkness fell my dreams of bliss was shattered. For the girl that was stuck on me come smokin' along till she was close enough to whisper, and what do you think she told me?"

He paused and cast his eye at the barkeeper. That individual awaited no instructions from me, but brought the refreshments immediately.

"She put me on to the fact that the custom of the tribe was this: That condemned criminals was fed to the lions and treated in every way for a month so as to make them sorry to leave. And that I was elected. At the end of the month it was me to the martyr's stake."

"Now wasn't that a nice love song to warble in your ear?"

"I was some depressed for a minute, and then all at once I remembered Bill. Why, I mighty near laughed when I remembered Bill. I told Sally Ann about Bill, and she got all excited about it and chirped up a lot."

"Well, mornin' come, and I called up the high priests and the chiefs and I give them a talk. I told them I was somethin' in the priest line myself—and in proof I had the sacred fetich tattooed on my stummick. I could see they was mighty impressed, so when the proper time come I flashed Bill on 'em."

"They were interested all right and looked him over one at a time and talked to each other in whispers. Then they went away. But they didn't let me out of the cage nor knock their heads on the ground for a cent. And the five square meals come right along as usual."

"I could hardly wait for it to get dark enough for Sally Ann. When she crept near I opened up on her."

"Look here, Sally," says I, "why don't they let me out?"

"They're not goin' to let you out," says she, "they're going to kill you in forty days."

"What?" says I, "what's the matter? Ain't this thing on my stummick the sacred fetich?"

"Yes," says she, "it's a fetich all right. But it's not a good fetich. It's a bad fetich."

"Well, I was otherwise informed," says I. "Look here, what's the matter with it?"

"Good fetiches are always solemn and sad," says she, "but bad fetiches grin."

"Well, this oar's solemn enough," I insists.

"No, he smiles," says she.

"I couldn't believe that. But when mornin' come I got out my pocket mirror and took a look at Bill; but my stummick had got so fat and round that now he had a grin on him like a man who's found a dollar."

"That day I done a lot of tall thinkin', and however I'd go at it I come out always at the same results—reduce, train down, quit eatin'. It come hard, I promise you that."

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"That day I done a lot of tall thinkin', and however I'd go at it I come out always at the same results—reduce, train down, quit eatin'. It come hard, I promise you that."

"The natives brought me all the dainties of the season and just tempted me. They done their cookin' near to hand where I was, and when they'd got me fairly to dreamin' like a baby they'd trot out a new brewin' of fried chicken with sweet potatoes, and I simply couldn't get water when I was thirsty. They brung me big bowls of coconut juice, which is the most fattenin' thing a feller can eat. It makes me dream, but it's just to think of it, it's so good."

At these words the seafaring man, though neither of us had glanced in his direction, suddenly replenished the glasses.

"But the fear of death was a hard devil. At the end of a week I began to get sick. I was so sick that Bill's smile wasn't quite so cheerful as it had been, but I had on my weeks left, and I calmed myself with a good sixty pounds to lose."

"I done some more tall thinkin'. Eatin' less was out of the question. 'My son,' says I to myself, 'you need, heaps of exercise. That was all very well to talk about, but exercise—how was I to get it? Six by four cage? I couldn't do do calisthenics. Then a brain stroke me all of a heap. Just as easy as I could fix it I called on them high priests and give them a talk."

"Look here, my heartiest," says I to them, "I know I'm to be executed in five weeks more, and I'm proud and glad to get it from such persons as you. But my wish is to see you men as you are. You need, heaps of exercise. That was all very well to talk about, but exercise—how was I to get it? Six by four cage? I couldn't do do calisthenics. Then a brain stroke me all of a heap. Just as easy as I could fix it I called on them high priests and give them a talk."